

Lateral

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Review of *Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and the Politics of Practice* by Robert F. Carley (State University of New York Press)

by [jeffrey masko](#) | [Book Reviews, Issue 10.1 \(Spring 2021\)](#)

ABSTRACT In *Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and the Politics of Practice*, Robert Carley brings a wide array of theoretical and empirical study to make the claim that Antonio Gramsci was a critical race theorist, that Stuart Hall's important theoretical contributions like articulation are necessarily Marxist to bring structure and agency, long "opposite ends" of the sociological spectrum together in dialectical terms, for one to build a foundation for his original theories. He does so too when uses Gramsci's and his own work on race and ethnicity in early twentieth century Italy to bring light to the ideological aspects of today's social movements of race and class. In doing so through his various methodologies, he introduces his theory of ideological contention to explain who social movement organizations organize their tactics and how those tactics influence how groups organize, or practice ideology. His theory of aporetic governmentality, built of the foundations of Michael Foucault and Eduardo Bonilla Silva elucidate the process of institutional racism and how it manifests at the cultural and individual level, bringing a much needed Marxist lens to the issues of race, class, and social movement theory. Carley succeeds in achieving an interdisciplinary work that encompasses the areas of research needed for scholarly work that not only analyze, but create innovative theories that add to the multiple fields of research.

KEYWORDS [Antonio Gramsci](#), [critical race theory](#), [ideology](#), [Marxism](#), [Stuart Hall](#)

Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and the Politics of Practice. By Robert F. Carley. Albany, NY: SUNY University of New York Press, 2019, 240 pp. (hardback) ISBN 978-1-4384-7643-8.

In his 2019 book, *Autonomy, Refusal, and the Black Bloc: Positioning Class Analysis in Critical and Radical Theory*, Robert Carley engaged both Herbert Marcuse and Antonio Negri in his examination of the black bloc as a group of expressive tactics suggestive of class formation, not of individualism. Carley was interested in how ideology informs social practices within social movement organizations and the mutually constitutive nature of tactics and ideology as dialectical. That book's focus on tactics sets the stage for his new book, *Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and the Politics of Practice*. In it, Carley follows with another excellent analysis that seeks to position Antonio Gramsci within critical race theory and moves to develop a theory of ideology—ideological contention theory (ICT)—that springs from his work on Gramsci's organizing prior to and during the *Biennio Rosso*. Carley employs a sophisticated interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis in order to address the issues surrounding race and its connection to class in

our current political landscape.

Culture and Tactics can be read as a response to the charge that Marxist theory (and historical materialism in particular) is class reductionist. Carley accomplishes this by offering proof in the way of case studies by Gramsci to establish structural Marxism as constructivist, and necessary but not sufficient to theorizing race and racialization. It can also be seen as an intervention into cultural studies by asserting the necessity of Karl Marx and historical materialism, partly through building on Stuart Hall. One way Carley does this is to show the debt that Hall has explicitly shown to Gramsci and structural Marxism in his mid-career writing—such as in “Gramsci’s Relevance”¹—providing a theoretical bridge that allows the articulation of race and class necessary to understand what directions to take towards a more just society.

Carley succeeds on multiple levels in achieving the goals he sets out clearly and early: linking racial exclusion to economic exploitation through Gramsci’s work, using a non-reductive approach to race and class, and presenting an analysis that transforms theory. He offers evidence that the conception of historical materialism that Gramsci advances can be non-deterministic and is essential as an analytical tool in Marxist theory and invaluable in social movement studies, as are ICT and aporetic governmentality. The first few chapters lay out Carley’s methodologies and define terms such as tactics, practice, articulation, hegemony, and more, as well as his own notion of ICT.

His first move posits that tactics are essentially the same as practices, or at least subsumed by them categorically, allowing them to be compared to the social movement studies version of practices and protest actions and movements. Collapsing the distinction between tactics and strategy, Carley is then able to examine tactics and strategies in ideological struggles, rather than through the lens of the dialectic between military and ideological operations, supporting a much greater depth of analysis. In ICT theory, Carley “addresses the relationship between social movements’ organizational composition, strategic choices, tactical actions (protest), and ideology whereby organization and ideology form a dialectical relationship” (101). ICT allows Carley to posit ideology as the “central organizing component” of the relationship within a social movement organization (112) and in doing so, opens the door for the agile materialisms of chapter five.

The next chapters look at Gramsci’s work on the “Southern Question,” organizing southern Sardinian workers and World War I veterans with striking workers in Turin, refusing to toe the scientific racism of the day. This is probably the best section of the book: Carley’s experience researching the *Biennio Rosso* shines as he elucidates the connections between Gramsci’s experiences and present day race talk in the US. He brings to light how the same mechanisms—such as regionalism and biological determinism (albeit with different characteristics)—function today, using race to exclude and the economic to exploit, all the while remaining largely unexamined by the philosophical basis of abstract liberalism that is the foundation of the institutions of this country. To excavate this further, Carley makes sure to explicitly point out that the institutions of slavery and racism must always be part of the conversation to understand past and present conjunctures that deny the Black body political subjectivity in specific historical moments.

The later chapters get more theoretical, culminating in Carley’s notion of aporetic

governmentality, or how the absence of a subjectivity (in this case, the Black body in the US) links to the function of colorblindness and to modes of governmentality. From Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Carley expertly weaves theorists from a wide range of disciplines and fields into a coherent fabric that frames and supports his own theories of ideological contention and aporetic governmentality. By tying his explication of Hall's concept of articulation in chapters one and two to the four frames from Bonilla Silva's work and the extension of Michael Foucault's theory of governmentality in the final chapter of the book, Carley's contribution to social movement theory shines as an interdisciplinary synthesis that supports his original contentions that link race and class together.

Some questions do creep in, such as definitional slippage: are tactics and practices equivalent or does practice somehow exceed tactics? If not, what is the use of the distinction? The same can be said about the difference between strategy and tactics; if the distinction between them has indeed "collapsed," then how are they different (36)? Carley targets abstract liberalism and neoliberalism effectively as underpinning institutions that see racism and racialization as purely cultural manifestations, and yet there is some question about the relationship between the collective mass of workers in a revolutionary workers' party system and the atomization of that mass in social protest networks that social movement studies examines. For example, is the revolutionary action envisioned by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Gramsci the same as the protest actions proffered by social movement studies?

Nevertheless, Carley's book should go on to become a staple of research on Gramsci, social movement theory, cultural studies, communication and media studies, and more. It is truly a model of the kind interdisciplinary work needed to knit together the wide array of intellectual and political discourses for successful analysis of the present (or any) conjuncture. The book is at times quite dense with theory, and some prior knowledge of scholars like Gramsci, Hall, Bonilla-Silva, and Foucault, as well as concepts like articulation, the four frames of colorblind racism, and so on, might be necessary. However, this is unavoidable in an interdisciplinary work, and Carley handles the theoretical inclusions deftly by providing the reader the needed background in clear, accessible language. Scholars and engaged activists will find multiple insights to take with them.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *Culture and Tactics* has an explanatory power that when applied to the current political landscape offers a way past the limitations of abstract liberalism, to find connections between structure and agency. *Culture and Tactics* allows anyone who is interested in the present conjuncture—and who has the desire to do the work—to make clear connections between race and class that can guide the trajectory of dialogue and action.

Notes

1. Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (June 1986): 5–27. ↩
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